

# The lunatic fringe? The Moon in ancient thought and fiction

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Theories about travel in outer space and extra-terrestrial life are not just themes in modern science and science fiction; some of the most imaginative writers and thinkers of the ancient world also pondered the possibility of encountering life on other worlds. In particular, they speculated about life on the Moon...and in doing so, provoked readers to think about life on Earth.

The Moon fascinated the ancient Greeks and Romans. For Greek poetess Sappho, she was the 'rosy-fingered' Moon – her softly-radiating moonbeams evoking the image of creamy-white rose-petals unfurling from the flower's core. She was personified as the goddess Selene, and said to visit nightly her sleeping lover Endymion in a lonely cave.

The Moon was also the object of more scientific interest: the earliest Greek philosopher whose thoughts have been recorded, Thales of Miletus, predicted lunar eclipses accurately in the fifth century B.C.; the philosopher Anaxagoras argued correctly that the Moon did not have its own luminescence, but that its light was reflected from the Sun.

Ancient philosophers more generally liked to speculate on questions such as the Moon's size, substance and – most tantalizing of all – the question of whether it was capable of sustaining life. Again in the fifth century, Anaxagoras believed that the Moon was an earth-like world capable of sustaining plant and animal life, and that there were 'dwellings' (*oikseis*) on the Moon. A century later, the philosopher Xenocrates speculated more ambitiously about the existence of entire lunar cities. If there were dwellings and cities on the Moon, who were the beings who lived in them?

## Moon-walkers (and Helen of Troy)

Pythagorean philosophers were convinced that the Moon was an inhabited world, and evolved some amazingly detailed theories about the nature of the extra-terrestrials who lived there. Philolaus speculated that the Moon-people were fifteen times larger and more beautiful than Earthlings. Herodorus of Heraclea argued that Moon-women did

not reproduce the way Earth-women do; instead, they lay eggs, and their newborn hatchlings are fifteen times larger than Earth-babies. On the basis of these theories – in what is surely one of the strangest debates from the ancient world – the Pythagorean Neocles of Croton speculated that Helen of Troy, who was famously more beautiful than any other woman in the world and who, according to mytho-logy, had been hatched from her mother Leda's egg, was actually a Moon-woman. Fanciful? Yes, and perhaps Neocles had his tongue in his cheek when he made this suggestion. On the other hand, according to the Greek travel-writer Pausanias, one could still see one of Leda's eggs hanging in a temple in Sparta in the second century A.D., so perhaps this sort of thinking was rather less ludicrous to ancient thinkers than to us. Neocles' idea about Helen the Moon-woman was at least an attempt to rationalize the strange myth about Helen's birth by interpreting it within contemporary scientific thinking.

## Plutarch on biodiversity

Plutarch, the prolific Greek intellectual writer of the first century A.D., devoted a lengthy treatise to the subject of the blotches on the lunar surface – the so-called 'Man-in-the-Moon'. The treatise, which is called *On the face which appears in the orb of the Moon*, is presented in the form of a discussion between a group of famous intellectuals. It is a rich repository of theories which account for the Moon's distinctive appearance; for example, we learn here that some people believed that the lunar blotches were caused by vapours rising from the Earth below and obscuring the face of the Moon, rather like steam obscures a mirror. Another fascinating explanation is that these blotches were

mirror-reflections of the Earth's oceans far below. But Plutarch's treatise also contains a much wider range of speculation about the Earth's mysterious satellite, including the possibility of lunar life. If there is life on the Moon, how should we account for it?

Some of the speakers in Plutarch's dialogue argue that the Moon, which was even closer to the Sun than our Earth, must be a parched world incapable of sustaining life, as its surface must be hotter than any terrestrial desert, where nothing grows and no life can survive. However, another speaker, Lamprias, makes an argument in support of lunar life based on the principle of biodiversity. As Lamprias points out, deserts do sustain some life; indeed some plants can only survive in desert conditions. So could not the same be true of the desert Moon? Moon-beings may not have the same physical requirements as we do, either; they may even be able to survive on mere air and vapours rather than on solid foods from animals and vegetation. Just think of the Earth's oceans, Lamprias suggests: the sea is wet, cold, briny, and airless. From our point of view as land-creatures, nothing ought to be able to survive in there and theories about marine life should be the stuff of 'myths and incredible tales'. Yet the fact is that Earth's oceans are teeming with many different forms of life. So should the same principle not hold true also for the Moon?

## The Moon in ancient fiction

Some ancient writers adapted this scientific fascination with the Moon to their own imaginative fictions. The most famous of these is Lucian of Samosata, a writer in Greek of the second century A.D. Lucian (who features in this *Omnibus* also in Emily Kneebone's article on p. 4) was a prolific writer of philosophical satire as well as fiction, and the weird and wonderfully contradictory theories of ancient philosophers were grist to his mill. In one of his satirical works, called *Icaromenippus*, the main character Menippus flies to Heaven in order to parley with Zeus. He stops for a rest on his way, and strikes up a conversation with the

Moon who complains bitterly about the philosophers who ‘have nothing better to do than to interfere with my affairs: who I am, what I’m made of, and why I become half-moon and crescent. Some claim I am inhabited, while others say that I hang over the sea like a mirror, and others attach to me whatever theory they think of. Lately they even claim my light itself is stolen and forged, derived from the Sun...’ (*Icaromenippus* 20).

The Moon’s comical exasperation in *Icaromenippus* shows that Lucian was well-informed on the bewildering array of theories and often-ludicrous ideas that were characteristic of ancient lunar lore. It was a store of knowledge which he exploited to the full in his most famous work of fantasy-fiction, the ironically-titled *True Histories*.

In the famous preface of *True Histories* Lucian warns his readers – unexpectedly – not to believe a word of his narrative: the only truth he will tell is that everything he says is a lie (a version of the well-known ‘liar paradox’). Clearly, the slippery relationship between truth, lies, and fiction is going to be an important concern in a work of fantasy called *True Histories*.

Immediately following the preface, Lucian and his crew set out on a voyage of exploration to find the other side of the world. They quickly vanish off the map when a storm lifts their ship up into the air for seven days and seven nights. On the eighth day they arrive on a bright island in the air which they discover is the Moon itself. The lunar kingdom is ruled by Endymion, and the Earthlings have arrived on the eve of a great cosmic battle between the inhabitants of the Moon and the Sun, a dispute over colonization rights of Morning Star. It soon becomes clear that this battle is an inter-stellar version of the fifth-century Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, which was the subject of Thucydides’ great work of history. The problems of imperialism, it seems, are not confined to Earth. But once the space-dust has settled after the battle and a peace-treaty has been drawn up, Lucian takes time out to describe for his Earth-readers what he saw and what he discovered about the people who live on the Moon...

### Lucian’s lunar ethnography (*True Histories* 1.22–26)

Lucian’s ‘ethnography’ or description of the Moon-people and their customs is written in the style of the Greek historian Herodotus’ famous descriptions of exotic, non-Greek people on Earth such as the Egyptians (in book 2 of his *Histories*) or the inhabitants of India (in book 3). Like Herodotus, Lucian points out curious differences in the Moon-men’s customs such as eating, drinking, clothing, and reproduction. In some respects, as we

shall see, the most alien differences seem oddly familiar...

**Moon-babies:** Unlike the Pythagorean Moon, there are no women at all on Lucian’s Moon (there is not even a word for ‘woman’ in the Moon-language, Lucian says). It is an all-male society. Babies gestate in the father’s thigh, which swells and expands until it is time for birth, at which point the child is delivered by Caesarean section. This idea is strangely familiar, reminiscent of the birth of the god Dionysus from Zeus’ thigh...

**Moon-men:** The Moon-men themselves have some peculiar physical features, for example they have amazing removable eyes. There are different species on the Moon, including the Tree-men, an intelligent vegetable life-form. Lunar society is distinguished by different classes: wealthy Moon-men wear clothes made of glass and own multiple sets of eyes, whereas the poor make do with the pair of eyes they were born with (if they lose this pair, they must borrow from a friend), and wear clothes of woven bronze instead!

**Eating and drinking on the Moon:** As for diet, the Moon-men drink dew, but don’t eat solid food the way that we do; instead, they roast quantities of flying-frogs on an open fire, gather round, and inhale the savoury smoke which fills the air. The notion that the Moon-people could survive on such meagre sustenance as air and other vapours is familiar from Plutarch’s dialogue *On the face of the Moon*, but Lucian also alludes comically here to a famous passage in Herodotus’ *Histories* (4.75) where the historian describes the Scythians howling with pleasure as they enjoy the fumes of their hemp-seed ‘vapour baths’.

### The Moon as mirror-world

It will hopefully be clear, even from this brief sample of Lucian’s ethnography, that there is a serious vein of scientific thinking threaded through this riotous imagination. Lucian deftly interweaves history with scientific ‘fact’ and a generous dollop of fantasy in his *True Histories*, and in doing so makes several provocative points. The weirdest Earthly people (like Herodotus’ hemp-inhaling Scythians) can appear as alien to us as the Moon-men – and yet, in certain respects, like in their imperialistic quarrels with the Sun and in their obsession with class-distinctions, the Moon-men can, paradoxically, seem strangely familiar, too.

In much of ancient scientific thinking, it was speculated that the Moon was suspended over the Earth like a giant mirror, its mottled face reflecting the topography of our world. In Lucian’s fiction, too, the Moon forms a mirror-image of our world, but in a more abstract,

more philosophical sense. Lucian’s fantastically topsy-turvy lunar world becomes a backdrop against which we are invited to re-think our comfortable notions about what is ‘normal’ and familiar, and what is ‘alien’ and odd. Moreover, by writing the wildest fantasy in the style of the great classical Greek historians, Lucian also provokes us to ponder how reliable or truthful even apparently ‘true histories’ really are...

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